

# All's well that ends well? Xenophon's *Anabasis* and narrative closure

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Should Xenophon have put his pen down after writing book 4? What makes book 4 seem such a good ending? And how satisfactory is the rest of the *Anabasis*? Here Emma Aston has us look again at the question of narrative closures and endings to show why we should perhaps stifle our disappointment.

## A quick summary of the *Anabasis*

The *Anabasis* ('march up-country') narrates the fortunes of a group of mercenaries from many parts of Greece, who go to Asia to fight for a young pretender to the Persian throne, Cyrus, at the end of the fifth century B.C.. Cyrus plans to overthrow his older brother, king Artaxerxes. But, unfortunately, he perishes in their first major battle, at Cunaxa, and the Greeks are left leaderless, surrounded by enemies and faced with the seemingly impossible task of getting back to Greece.

The fact that they do eventually reach the Hellespont, against all the odds, is in part due to the valour and ingenuity of Xenophon – who is both the author and a *dramatis persona*, narrating his own deeds in the third person, under a pseudonym to conceal his identity. For, in this work, Xenophon emerges from obscurity as a non-combatant member of the expedition and over the course of the work becomes more and more crucial to the survival of the Ten Thousand (as the Greek army is traditionally named).

## Struggles, survival, and success in book 4

What makes the close of book 4 such a good 'ending'? Importantly, book 4 contains the hardest fighting and the worst physical toil which the Ten Thousand experienced. The Greeks struggle north over the snowy highlands of Armenia, fighting for every step of progress and for every coign of vantage, playing cat-and-mouse with elusive enemy tribesmen in the blizzard, losing each other as the column thins and breaks, food scarce, frostbite and snow-blindness setting in.

There are lighter moments with which Xenophon carefully leavens the narrative:

finding food and shelter in the underground houses of the Armenians, learning how to drink wine through straws from a common bowl. But on the whole the struggle is emphasized, for two reasons. First, because hardship allows the excellence of Xenophon as leader to shine forth; second, because the intensity of the difficulty makes its eventual ending all the more powerful. The famous moment when the Greeks sight the shore of the Black Sea before them – '*Thalatta, thalatta!*' ('The Sea! The Sea!'), they cry – would not possess half the force had the journey been an easy one. Hence, they embrace each other, weep, and build a stone mound (4.7.25).

What follows is significant. After a regrettable encounter with toxic honey – one of the distinctly comic touches which mark this part of the book – the Ten Thousand hold games. These are slightly ludicrous: the horse-race is held on a steep slope, so the animals race madly downhill and labour slowly uphill, while the spectators fall about laughing. But they are also quintessentially Greek. They are a small, weird version of the major games which drew Greeks together from their various regions and city-states: to Olympia, Nemea, Delphi, or the Isthmus. They are the perfect expression of solidarity among a group which has just fought its way through men – *barbaroi*, as they would have seen them – of the worst kind. Not just a spot of rest and relaxation, then, but a vital affirmation of cohesion and collective identity. 'There was much shouting, and laughter, and cheering,' Xenophon adds, in a line that could have worked well as an ending to the book as a whole.

## Not so happy ever after

Although the Black Sea marks the edge of the familiar, it is not Greece, and the Ten Thousand are not yet home. Hence, books 5 to 7 see them continuing their journey through Paphlagonia, Bithynia, and Phrygia, with a curious diversion into Thrace. In the process, the tone of the narrative changes markedly, and the triumph of their arrival at the coast is steadily dismantled.

Once on the shore of the Black Sea, the Ten Thousand are no longer surrounded by *barbaroi*. Instead, Greek and non-Greek communities co-exist, and it is no coincidence that, in this more complex cultural environment, the solidarity of the army begins to fail. That is not to say that perfect cohesion was ever achieved, or local differences set wholly aside. Amidst the travails of book 4, Xenophon takes the trouble to tease the Spartan general Cheirisophus about the Spartans' reputation for thievery; Cheirisophus returns fire with a joke about Athenian political corruption. But their jibes were good-natured. Whereas now, from Book 5, real schism sets in.

It is illuminating that when they reach the Greek city of Byzantium on the Hellespont they come close to sacking it. Xenophon managed to restrain his comrades, but only with difficulty. What is important, here, is that the Ten Thousand have changed from being heroes into a menace to the safety of their fellow Greeks. It is in this climate of confusion and recrimination that Xenophon's own position meets its first serious challenge. A quasi-official enquiry is held into the past conduct of the army's generals, and Xenophon is hauled over the coals for supposed acts of violence against his own soldiers during the Armenian march. Of course he defends himself with ease, and the mood of the assembly swings his way once more. But a shadow has fallen over the memory of their glorious escape from disaster.

## A weakening resolve

A more serious charge is made concerning

Xenophon's resolve to take the army home to Greece (5.6–7). Though he easily deflects the accusation that he wanted to lead the army eastwards, back on its tracks, our perception of his motivation is permanently altered. We learn that he did actually consider founding a city on the Black Sea shore, with the Ten Thousand as citizens: it was likely, he thought, to prove a lucrative venture, and to provide 'extra land and resources for Greece' (5.6.15). Laudable as he makes the notion sound, this is a startling disclosure.

Returning to Greece has been the core motif of books 1 to 4 – a rallying cry, a mantra. This has been expressed in terms of the Homeric concept of *nostos*, return; in book 3, Xenophon had likened the army to Odysseus' companions, leaving behind the land of the Lotus-Eaters to return to Ithaca (3.2.25). What has happened to the *nostos*-motif in the last three books? It seems increasingly remote as Greece grows closer.

Xenophon wavers, and not only when he dreams of a new city. In book 7, when the Ten Thousand hire their services to the Thracian chieftain Seuthes, Xenophon hopes that Seuthes will give him a pied-à-terre in his kingdom, 'somewhere nice for me and my children, if I should have any' (7.6.34). If this sounds rather plaintive, that's because it is: Xenophon is forced to give up his Thracian-estate dream, as he gave up his city-foundation dream, by the unsympathetic response of his comrades, whom, by this stage, he heartily wishes to shed.

### The real ending of the *Anabasis*

The *nostos* of the Ten Thousand remains forever unfulfilled; most of the army never reach Greece, at least not within Xenophon's narrative. This astonishing fact – that after so much determined homeward marching their goal is never actually achieved – is stated briefly and casually in the *Anabasis*' closing lines:

*'Meanwhile, Thibron arrived and took over the army. He combined it with the rest of the Greek forces under his command and started to make war on Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus' (7.8.24).*

Thibron is a Spartan, beginning a campaign in Asia Minor. What an ending! Not only do the Ten Thousand not get home, they also, in effect, stop being the Ten Thousand. They are subsumed in Thibron's large invasion force, turn eastward again, and ... vanish from our view. And that's that.

### ... And what to make of it

So, what are we to make of this damp squib of an ending? Answering this ques-

tion forces us to confront a fundamental uncertainty about Xenophon: is he a guileless or a guileful narrator? Does he end the *Anabasis* simply as he recalls events, without artifice, casually, because he sees no great importance in the fate of the army once he has left it? Or is the disappointing ending an authorial comment on the situation and on the conditions of the time? Ultimately we cannot know, and yet it seems to me that the lack of satisfactory resolution was something that Xenophon really felt, even if he did not articulate it with the conscious sophistication of a Thucydides.

### An eloquent irresolution?

To help us come to some sort of conclusion, it is instructive to compare the ending of the *Anabasis* to Xenophon's other major work, the *Hellenica*. The *Hellenica* ends with the battle of Mantinea in 362 B.C., a battle at which the major Greek powers vying for hegemony – Thebes, Sparta and their respective allies – sustain massive casualties without achieving any resolution. As Xenophon says:

*'Neither side was found to be any better off, as regards either additional territory, or city, or sway, than before the battle took place; but there was even more confusion and disorder in Greece after the battle than before' (Hellenica 7.5.27).*

As a comment on fourth-century Greek history, this anti-climax is hard to beat. The city-states have fought each other to a standstill, but none can ultimately prevail. And could we not view the end of the *Anabasis* in a similar light? Let us take another look.

By the beginning of book 5, the Greek triumphalism of the earlier books has evaporated; after their dreamlike Asian adventure the Ten Thousand turn back into their true form: a rag-bag of squabbling Greeks, a sample of the division and fragmentation of the age. Are they saved from final ignominy by Thibron, who turns them east once more to attack perfidious satraps? Not really: we know (because Xenophon tells us so in the *Hellenica*) that Thibron's mission was not going to be especially successful, and that Sparta's campaigning in Asia would soon be cut short by the revolt of her subject-states back in Greece. What this means is that the ending of the *Anabasis* – the real ending, that is – is truer to the historical reality of his times than is the 'false' ending at the close of book 4. We might like the *Anabasis* better if it stopped at the Black Sea shore in glory and good humour, but then it would have far less to teach us. Instead, when the closure of the *Anabasis*

finally comes it leaves us with a real sense of the troubled, muddled times through which its author lived: an eloquent irresolution which lets its readers draw their own conclusion.

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